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HUNGER

A DUBLIN STORY
BY JAMES ESSE



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HUNGER

BY JAMES ESSE

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ON some people misery comes unrelentingly, with such a continuous rage that one might say destruction had been sworn against them, and that they were doomed beyond appeal, or hope. That seemed to her to be the case as she sat, when her visitor had departed, looking on life as it had moved about her, and she saw that life had closed on her and crushed her, and that there was nothing to be said about it, and no one to be blamed.

She was four years married, and she had three children. One of them had fallen when he was quite young, and had hurt his back so badly that the dispensary doctor instructed her not to let him walk for a few years.

She loved all her children, but this child she loved greatly, for, of the three, she had to do the most for him. Indeed

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she had to do everything for him, and she loved to do it. He was the eldest and he was always with her : so were the others, of course, for a woman in needy circumstances can never get away from her children ; but the other youngsters were with her as screamings and demands, to be attended to and forgotten, while he was with her as a companion eye, a consciousness to whom she could talk and who would reply to her, and who would not by any means get into mischief. He could not get into anything else either.

Her husband was a housepainter, and when work was brisk he got good wages : he could earn thirty-five shillings a week when he was working. But his work was constant only in the summer months : through the bad weather there was no call for him, for no one wanted house-painting done in the winter, and so the money which he earned in the fine months had to be stretched and made to cover the remaining seven months of the year.

Nor were these five months to be entirely depended upon : here and there in a week days would be missed, and with

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that his Society dues had to be paid, for he would pay those though he starved for it.

Wages which have to be stretched so lengthily give but the slenderest sum towards a weekly budget : it was she who had to stretch them, and the doing of that occupied all the time she could spare for thinking. She made ends meet where nothing was but ends, and they met just over the death line of starvation. She had not known for three years what it was like not to be hungry for one day, but life is largely custom, and neither she nor her husband nor the children made much complaint about a condition which was normal for them all, and into which the children had been born. They could scarcely die of hunger for they were native to it : they were hungry, and there was no other hunger but them : and they only made a noise about food when they saw food.

If she could have got work how gladly she would have taken it, how gladly she would have done it : sweated work, any work, so that it brought in if it was no

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more than two or three coppers in the day. But the children were there, three of them, and all were young and one was a cripple. Her own people, and those of her husband, lived, existed, far away in the country : they could not take the children off her hands : she could not give a neighbour anything to look after them while she went out working : she was held to them as fast as if she were chained to them, and, for to think in such cases is only to be worried, there was no use in thinking about it. She had already all the worry she could deal with, and she wanted no more.

She remembered the tale she had laughed at, when she was young, about a woman who had been circumstanced as she was now : this woman used to put her two children into a box, for she had to go out every day to work in order that she might feed them, and she kept them in the box so that they might not injure themselves during her absence. It was a good idea, but the children came out of the box hunchbacks, and so stunted in their growth that it might be said they

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never grew thereafter. It would have been better for the children, and easier for them, if they had died ; anyhow, their mother died, and the poor little oddities went to the workhouse, and must all their lives have got all the jeers which their appearance sanctioned.

There was nothing to be done ; even her husband had long ago given up thinking of how this could be arranged, and although she still and continually thought about it, she knew that nothing could be done.

Her husband was a jolly man ; he used to make up lists of the gigantic feeds they would have when the ship came home (what ship he did not say, nor did he ever say that he expected one), and he or she or the children would remind each other of foods which had been left out of his catalogue, for no food of which they knew the name could justly be omitted from their future.

He was a robust man, and could have eaten a lot if he got it ; indeed he had often tempted his wife to commit an act of madness and have one wild blow-out,

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for which, as she pointed out to him, they would have to pay by whole days of whole starvation, instead of the whole days of semi-hunger to which they were accustomed.

This was the only subject on which they came near to quarrelling, and he brought it forward with fortnightly regularity.

Sometimes she went cold at the thought that he might on some pay-day go in for a wild orgy of eating, and perhaps spend half-a-crown ; less than that sum could not nearly fill him, and the double of it would hardly fill him the way he wanted to be filled ; for he wanted to be filled as tightly as a drum, and with such a weight and abundance of victual that he could hardly be lifted by a crane.

But he was an honourable man, and she knew he would not do this unless she and the children were with him and could share and go mad with him. He was very fond of them, and if she could have fed him on her own flesh she would have sacrificed a slice or two, for she was very fond of him.

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The mild weather had come, and he got a cut in his hand, which festered and seemed stubbornly incurable : the reason was that the poor, gaunt man was not fed well enough to send clean blood down to doctor his cut hand ; but in the end he did get over it. But for three weeks he had been unable to work, for who will give employment to a man whose hand looks like a poultice or a small football ?

The loss of these three weeks almost finished her. The distinguishing mark of her family had been thinness, it was now bonyness. To what a food-getting fervour she was compelled ! She put the world of rubbish that was about her through a sieve, and found nourishment for her family where a rat would have found disappointment. She could not beg, but she did send her two children into the street, and sometimes one of these got a copper from a passing stranger ; then that youngster gave out a loyal squeal for his companion, like the call of a famished crow who warns his brothers that he has discovered booty ; and they trotted home with their penny. The sun

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shone on the day they got a penny : on the days when they got nothing the sun might split the bricks, but it did not shine.

Her man returned to his work, and if she could hold on they would be able to regain the poverty of a few months previously, but which now beamed to her as distant, unattainable affluence. She could hold on, and she did ; so that they tided feebly across those evil days, and came at last to the longed-for scarcity which yet was not absolute starvation, and whereby they could live in the condition of health to which they were accustomed, and which they recognised and spoke of as good-health.

They could not absolutely come to this for at least a year ; provision had still to be made for the lean months to come, the winter months, and more than three weeks' wages which should have been skimmed in this precaution had been unprofitable, had not existed. The difference had to be made up by a double skimming of the present wage, which must also pay the present necessities and recoup the baker and grocer for the few

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weeks' credit these shop people had given her.

In all, their lot for a long time was not to be envied, except by a beast in captivity, and by him only because he lusts for freedom and the chance of it as we lust for security and the destruction of chance.

The winter came—the winter will come tho' the lark protest and the worm cries out its woe; and she entered on that period with misgiving, with resolution, and a facing of everything that might come. What bravery she had! What a noble, unwearying courage, when in such a little time and as such small labour she might have died! But such an idea never came to her head. She looked on the world, and she found that the world was composed of a man and three children; while they lasted she could last, and when they were done it would be time enough to think of personal matters and her relation to things.

Before the summer had quite ended, before autumn had tinted a leaf, the war broke out, and with its coming there came

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insecurity : not to her, not to them : they had no standard to measure security by ; it came to the people who desire things done, who pay to have doors varnished and window-frames painted. These people drew silently but resolutely from expense ; while he and she and the children sunk deeper into their spending as one wallows into a bog. The prices of things began to increase with a cumulative rapidity, and the quality of things began to deteriorate with equal speed. Bread and the eater of it came to a grey complexion. Meat got the cut direct instead of the direct cut. The vegetables emigrated with the birds. The potato got a rise in the world and recognised no more its oldest friends. There seemed to be nothing left but the rain, and the rain came loyally.

They, those others, could retrench and draw in a little their horns, but from what could she go back ? What could she avoid ? What could she eliminate, who had come to the bare bone and shank of life ? The necessity for the loaf comes daily, recurs pitilessly from digestion to

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digestion, and with the inexorable promptitude of the moon the rent collector wanes and waxes.

They managed : she and he managed : work still was, although it was spaced and intervalled like a neglected storm-blown hedge. Here was a week and there another one, and from it they gleaned their spare constricted existence.

They did not complain : those who are down do not complain. Nor did they know they were down ; or, knowing it, they did not admit their downness ; for to face a fact is to face with naked hands a lion, and to admit is to give in, to be washed away and to be lost and drowned ; anonymous, unhelpable, alive no more, but debris, or a straw which the wind takes and sails or tears or drifts or rots to powder and forgetfulness. A bone in a world of bones ! And they gnawed these bones until it seemed that nothing moved in the world or was alive except their teeth.

The winter came, and his work stopped as it always did in that season ; he got jobs cleaning windows, he got jobs at the

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docks hoisting things which not Hercules nor the devil himself could lift, but which he could lift, or which his teeth and the teeth of his children detached from the ground as from foundations and rivetings; he got a job as a coalman, and as a night-watchman sitting in the angle of a black street before a bucket of stinking coal which had been a fire until the rain put it out ; to-day he had a job, but to-morrow and for a week he had none.

With what had been saved, skimmed, strained from the summer wages, and with what came from the jobs, and with the pennies the children unearthed from strangers as though they dug in those loath souls for coin, they lived through the winter, and did not feel they had passed through any experience worth recording, or that their endurance might have been rewarded with medals and a pension. They were living, as we all manage amazing to live, and, if others had an easier time that was their chance ; but this was their life, and there were those who were even worse off than they were ; for they paid the rent, and when that was done

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what a deed had been accomplished, how notable an enemy circumvented !

The Spring came, but it brought no leaves to their tree ; the Summer came, but it did not come to them, nor warn them of harvest and a sickle in the yield. There was no building done that summer ; the price of material had gone up and the price of wages. The contractors did not care for that prospect, and the client thought of his income-tax and decided to wait. And her husband had no work ! He had almost given up even looking for work. He would go out of the house and come into the house, and he and she would look at each other in a dumb questioning. Sometimes she would say—not that she had anything to say, but to ease his heart with a comradely word—“ Any chance to-day, do you think ? ” and he would reply : “ Chance ! ” and sit down and brood upon that lapsing word. They were not angry, they had not the blood to be angry with ; for wrath you must be well fed or you must be drunk.

The youngest child died of a disease which, whatever it was at the top, was

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hunger at the bottom, and she grew terrified. She heard that there was work to be had in plenty in the Munition Factories in Scotland, and by some means she gathered together the fare and sent her husband across the sea.

"Write, if you can," said she, "the minute you get a place."

"Yes," he replied.

"And send us what you can spare," she said. "Send something this week if you can."

"Yes," he said ; and he went away.

Then she went into the streets to beg. She left the boy behind in his chair, and brought the other little one with her. She was frightened, for one can be arrested for begging, and she was afraid not to beg, for one can die of hunger. She got a penny here and a penny there, and bought bread ; sometimes even she got a twist of tea : she could manage until the end of the week, until her man sent the money : she had thoughts of singing at the corners of streets, as she had so often seen done by toneless, ashen-faced women, who creak rusty music at

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the passer, and fix him with their eyes ; but she was ashamed, and no song that she could remember seemed suitable, and she only could remember bits of songs ; and she knew her voice would not work for her, but would creak and mourn like a rusty hinge.

Her earnings were small, for she could not get in touch with people ; they recognised her at a distance as a beggar, and she could only whisper to the back of a head or a cold shoulder. Sometimes when she went towards a person that person instantly crossed the road and walked for a while hastily. Sometimes people fixed upon her a cold, prohibitive eye, and she drew back from them humbled, her heart panting and her eyes hot at the idea that they took her for a beggar. At times someone, without glancing at her, stuck a hand in a pocket and gave her a penny without halting in their stride. One day she got twopence, one day she got sixpence, one day she got nothing. But she could hold out to the end of the week.

The end of the week came, but it brought no letter. "It will come to-

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morrow," she said ; " he is in a strange country ; he must have missed the post, God help him ! " But on the following day there was no letter, and on the day after, and the day that succeeded to it there was no letter.

" He . . ! " she said. But she could not speculate on him. She knew him too well, and this was not him ; he could no more leave them in the lurch than he could jump across Ireland in one jump.

" He has not got work," she said ; and she saw him strayed and stranded, without a hand, without a voice, bewildered and lost among strangers ; going up streets and down streets, and twisting himself into a maze, a dizziness of loneliness and poverty and despair, or, she said, " The submarines had blown up the ship that was coming with the money."

The week went by, another came, and still she did not hear from him. She was not able to pay the rent. She looked at the children, and then she looked away from them distantly to her strayed husband, and then she looked inwardly on herself and there was nothing to see.

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She was down. No littlest hope could find a chink to peer through, and while she sat staring at nothing, in an immobile maze of attention her mind—she had no longer a heart, it had died of starvation—her mind would give a leap and be still, and would leap again as though an unknown, wordless action were seeking to be free, seeking to do some work, seeking to disprove stagnation and powerlessness and death, and a little burning centre of violence hung in her head like a star.

She followed people with her eyes, sometimes a little way with her feet, saying to herself :

“ The pockets of that man are full of money ; he would rattle if he fell.”

Or, “ That man had his breakfast this morning ; he is full of food to the chin ; he is round and tight and solid, and he weighs a ton.”

She said : “ If I had all the money of all the people in this street I would have a lot of money.”

She said : “ If I owned all the houses in this street I would have a lot of money.”

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The rent collector told her imperatively that she must leave at the end of the week. The children called to her for bread clamourously, unceasingly, like little dogs that yap and whine and cannot be made to stop.

Relief kitchens had been started in various parts of the City, but she only heard of them by chance, and she went to one. She told a lady in attendance her miserable tale, and was given the address of a gentleman who might assist her. He could give her a ticket which would enable her to get food, and he might be able to set her in the way of earning what would pay the rent. The lady thought her husband had deserted her, and said so without condemnation, as one who states a thing which had been known to happen, and the poor woman agreed without agreeing, for she did not believe it. But she did not argue about the matter, for now that she accepted food, she accepted anything that came with it, whether it was opinions or advice ; she was an acceptor, and she did not claim to possess even an opinion.

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She set out for the house of the gentleman who could give her the ticket which would get her food to bring home to the children. He lived at some distance, and when she got to his house the servant told her he had gone to his office ; at his office she was informed that he had gone out. She called three times at the office, and on the third time she was told that he had come in, but had gone home. She trudged to his house again, and would have been weary, but that her mind was far away from her trudging feet, and when the mind is away the body matters nothing. Her mind was back in the rooms looking at the children, listening to them, consoling them, telling them that in a little while she would be back and she would bring them something. They had not eaten anything for—how long was it ? Was it a year ! An eternity ! Had they ever eaten ! And one of them was sick ! She must get back : she had been away too long : but she must go forward before she could go back : she must get the ticket which was food and hope and a new beginning, or at least respite ; then she

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would be able to look about her ; the children would go to sleep, and she could plan and contrive and pull together those separated and dwindling ends.

She came to the gentleman's house. He was in, and she told him her story and how her case was desperate. He also believed that her husband had deserted her, and he promised to write by that night's post to find out the truth about the man, and to see that he was punished for his desertion. He had no tickets with him ; he had used them all, for the hungry people in Dublin were numerous, work was slack everywhere, and those who had never before applied for assistance were now forced to do so by dire and dreadful necessity. He gave her some money, and promised to call at her rooms on the following day to investigate her case.

She went homewards urgently, and near home she bought bread and tea. When she got in the crippled boy turned his dull, dumb eyes on her, and she laughed at him excitedly, exultantly, for she had food, lots of it, two loaves of it ; but the other child did not turn to her, and

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would never turn to her again, for he was dead, and he was dead of hunger.

She could not afford to go mad, for she still had a boy, and he depended on her with an utter helpless dependence. She fed him and fed herself, running from his chair to the other in its cot with the dumb agony of an animal who must do two things at once and cannot think which thing to do. She could not think ; she could hardly feel ; she was dulled and distressed and wild, and she was weakened by misery and tormented by duties, and life and the world seemed a place of businesses and futilities and unending unregulated demands on her. A neighbour, hearing that curious persistent trotting over her head, came up to the room to remonstrate, and remained to shed for her the tears which she could not weep herself. She, too, was in straits, and had nothing more to give them than those tears and the banal reiterations which are comfort because they are kindness.

Into this place the gentleman called on the following day to investigate, and was

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introduced to a room swept almost as clean of furniture as a dog kennel is ; to the staring, wise-eyed child who lived in a chair, and to the quiet morsel of death that lay in a cot by the wall. He was horrified, but he was used to sights of misery, and knew that when things have ceased to move they must be set moving again, and that all he could do was to remove some of the impediments which he found in the path of life so that it might flow on before it had time to become stagnant and rotten. He took from the dry-eyed, tongue-tied woman's shoulders all the immediate worry of death and arranged about the death certificate and registration and burial. He paid the rent, and left something to go on with as well, and he promised to get her work either in his house or at his office, but he would get her work to do somehow.

He came daily, and each day, in reply to her timid question as to news about her husband, he had nothing to say except that enquiries were being made. On the fifth day he had news, and he would have preferred any duty, however painful, to

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the duty of telling her his news. But he told it sitting on the one chair, with his hand over his eyes and nothing of his face visible except the mouth which shaped the sentences and spoke them. The munition people in Scotland had reported that a man of the name he was enquiring for had applied for work, and had been taken on a fortnight after his application. The morning after he began work he was found dead in a laneway. He had no lodgings in the city, and at the post-mortem examination it was found that he had died of hunger and exposure. She listened to that tale, looking from the gentleman who told it to her little son who listened to it. She moistened her lips with her tongue, but she could not speak, she could only stammer and smile. The gentleman also was looking at the boy.

"We must set this young man up," said he, heavily. "I will send a doctor to look him over to-day."

And he went away all hot and cold, beating his hands together as he walked, and feeling upon his shoulders all the weariness and misery of the world.

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